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ABSTRACT

A questionnaire was designed and administered by North Texas State University to determine why students drop out of the school. Of the 3,180 undergraduate dropouts who were surveyed, usable responses were received from 678. Demographic information on each student was obtained from the computerized student master file and was used for descriptive and comparative purposes. Lack of or insufficient financial support was an important factor cited for the nonreturn of many students. Over 17 percent of the respondents indicated that they needed a break and time to think about schooling. Respondents indicated their dissatisfaction with several aspects of the university, many of which relate directly to programs and services provided by Student Affairs personnel. Information about college majors of dropouts, their plans, academic standing, and other characteristics are provided. A sample questionnaire is appended. (SW)

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WHY THEY CAME . . . AND WHY THEY LEFT

A Study of Dropouts from a State University

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WHY THEY CAME . . . AND WHY THEY LEFT
A Study of Dropouts from a State University

Interest in higher education and its increasing availability have brought large numbers of students to college campuses all across the nation. However, there is also a related problem in that many of these students do not persist long enough to receive a college degree. Shulman points out the extent of the problem as she reports,

> American higher education's dropout rate is persistent, serious and difficult to reduce. As measured by a student graduating in four years from his original college, the dropout rate has been about 40 percent nationally for the past 45 years. . . . While transfer and returning students who eventually complete their degree programs reduce this attrition rate, there still remains a significant loss in investment of personal, institutional and governmental resources in higher education when students do not achieve their degree objectives (10, p. 3).

An author who has done extensive research in this area is Astin. He identifies dropouts "in their relationship to those who persist in college or complete their degree programs. His approach recognizes that time factors and transfer students affect the real rate of attrition" (10, p.3). Based on the results of a four-year longitudinal study, Astin makes use of the terms "persisters," "stopouts," and "dropouts."

Why Students Drop Out

For years educators have been interested in why students drop out or do not return. The general aproach is to turn to studies which analyze the causes of dropping out as a first step in reducing the rate of attrition. From these studies, they have

> developed a laundry list of personal and academic characteristics shared by many dropouts. However, this profile of the dropout-prone student is not necessarily an accurate predictor of which students will persist to degree completion within four years and which will either dropout, stopout, or transfer (10, p.3).

Noel agrees basically with Shulman, and points out that there appear to be two kinds of reasons why students drop out of college. These are "the stated or socially acceptable reasons (financial, health, personal) and the real reasons" (7, p. 35). He suggests that among the real reasons, the four most significant are:

* Isolation (loneliness, depression)
* Academic boredom (overlap with high school, uninspired teaching)
* Dissonance, incompatibility (environment, curriculum, people on the campus)
* Irrelevance ("We want to know why we are here, and you don't seem to be qualified to tell us.") (7, p. 35)

Another group of educator-researchers emphasize that there are also problems involved with students who are apprehensive about participating in any form of oral communication. This problem affects their classroom behavior as well as their personal life and relationships. These researchers have shown that about 20 percent of the school population suffers from communication apprehension and approximately another 20 percent are somewhat affected by it. Their research indicates that a like percentage may be found among college students (5).

Another method that is considered along with the individual characteristics survey is that of the degree of fit or congruence between

> the profile of the student and that of the college that retains or loses him. A good fit, it is theorized, insures a greater rate of retention . . .
>
> In contrast to Astin's efforts to examine statistically the factors that increase the probability of attrition, Cope and Hannah promote the theory of "congruence," . . .

> They do not construct a predictive profile of the student dropout from this data, but instead look at "qualitative reasons" for leaving. For example, the authors report that about 20 percent of student transfers to other institutions result from "a poor assessment of the social and intellectual climate" of the original institution (10, p. 3).

Because of situations like this, one educator has commented, "I have long since ceased answering the questions of high school seniors and their parents as to what is a 'good' or 'best' college. I ask good or best for whom?" (1, p. 14)

Long-Range Planning at NTSU

North Texas State University is a state school in north central Texas which began as a teachers "normal." Through the years it has developed outstanding departments in many areas, and has grown to an enrollment of 17,000. Roughly two-thirds of the students are undergraduates and about one-third of the undergraduates commute from out of the city of Denton. In July of 1975 the president of North Texas State appointed a task force to study the status of planning and budgeting at the university and lead in the development of a system to meet the needs of the university. Part of the development was an effort to determine information needs and work toward providing data needed by the planning and budgeting units of the university.

One area in which there was a need for information was in regard to the number of students who did not return from one semester to another. Until a report was produced by the office of University Planning and Analysis which gave the percentages for a three year period of time, there was speculation that the percentage could range from ten to fifty percent. It was

determined that of all the students who were enrolled in fall semesters for the three year period and did not graduate or were not put on academic suspension, 11.9 per cent did not return for the spring semester. Of those who were enrolled in the spring or came as "new" students in the summer, 19.0 per cent did not return in the fall. Since the university has many students who take courses only in the summer and return to another institution for the long terms, the higher percentage for spring and summer was understandable.

As a priority for long range planning reported in the five-year plan for the university, there is a commitment to develop a report on student retention through the files in the Registrar's office which will provide this information on a routine basis. Another commitment stated in the summer of 1977 was to conduct student retention surveys through the University Planning and Analysis office.

Interest Shown at NTSU

Interest has been shown occasionally at NTSU in the problem of what kind of students and how many of them are leaving without graduating. A study was conducted in 1974 of the students who had been in good standing with the university in the Fall of 1973 who failed to return in the Spring of 1974. The questionnaire used was designed to be open and had two pages of objective items and three pages to respond to subjective items. Even though the return postage was paid, only 167 responses (8.45 percent of the 1,976 mailed) were received.

In the past, personnel in the Dean of Students office interviewed each student who withdrew during a semester, but that practice has been discontinued. They felt that most of the time it was too late in the semester to help the student, and that they were wasting the students' time. If they had been able to target those students earlier in the semester, they could perhaps have helped them solve their problems, especially in such areas as financial, study skills, and counseling. They are still available for exit interviewing, but few students take advantage of it.

The Office of Admissions and Records has a continuing interest in student retention since they feel that retention is one of the bigger solutions to potential enrollment problems.

Chairmen of the Arts and Sciences departments have also shown an interest in this general area of investigation. They would like information on why students come to NTSU and why they leave without graduating.

Directors of several of the Student Affairs offices have expressed an interest in the situation and their vice president is interested in coordinating the information needs of her divisions with the survey reported in this paper.

Student Retention Survey

Through the fall and winter of 1977-78, plans were made by the personnel of the Planning and Analysis office to conduct a survey of recent "dropouts" from the university. After an extensive review of the literature, attendance at a conference

on follow-up surveys, and consultation with various persons on the campus, it was decided to design a questionnaire that could be used for that purpose.

The Survey Instrument

Further conferences with faculty members and deans, counselors and student affairs personnel, and the Planning and Budgeting Task Force led to the formulation of the instrument to use in the survey. It included a cover letter from the President and approximately two-and-a-half pages of questions, designed so that the information could be keypunched directly from the instrument. A place was also provided for the respondents to make whatever comments they wished.

In addition to the information to be secured from the survey instrument, demographic information on each student in the selected population was obtained from the computerized student master file at the university. This was used to compare those who responded to the questionnaire with all of those who continued in school the following semesters and those who did not return.

The questionnaire asked for some additional demographic information, and a five score rating of the students' degree of satisfaction with certain aspects of the university which could be used for evaluation of those services and also to help determine the amount of congruence between the student and the university. There was also a section asking the respondents to check the two most important reasons for their choosing to attend North Texas State.

Along with the usual "laundry list" of socially acceptable

reasons for students dropping or stopping out of school, a section of questions also included some of what have been called the "real" reasons for students dropping out. The respondents were asked to evaluate on a five part scale the importance of each item in their decision not to return. (See APPENDIX.)

Methodology

For this study, the target group was defined as undergraduate students who had been enrolled in the university for one of the long semesters in 1977, did not graduate nor go on academic suspension, and did not return the following long semester. Of these 3,227 individuals, 3,180 had usable United States permanent addresses and were selected as the population for the study. Demographic information on each student was obtained from the computerized student master file and was used for descriptive and comparative purposes.

In April, 1978, each member of the population was sent a copy of a questionnaire prepared by the researchers. After a period of six weeks, four of every five who had not responded (2,004 persons) were sent a second copy. Bulk rate postage was used for the large mailings, so three weeks was allowed for mail delivery to the addressees. Address corrections were requested, and every effort was made to send copies to each individual, however there were approximately 175 persons who probably did not ever receive a copy of the questionnaire. Business reply was used for the responses and at the end of June, 1978, 678 usable responses had been received. Representing 21 per cent of the population, these responses were used for the analysis.

Analysis of the Data

Comparison of students who continued in school and those who did not return indicated that there were more freshmen and fewer seniors who did not return than those who continued. On other factors the two groups were very similar.

The data for the total population of non-returning students and those who responded to the questionnaire were compared and indicated that the sample was fairly representative. The response was slightly higher from women than men and from Cuacasions than from minorities. Response was also slightly higher from juniors and seniors than from freshmen and sophomores. The various factors related to academic success also indicated that response was higher from those with better academic records.

Respondents were almost equally divided between the sexes and in the four academic levels. One-fourth of them were married and 93 per cent were Caucasians. Forty-one per cent had not transferred any semester credit hours to NTSU and 39.2 per cent had transferred 31 hours or more. Over 85 per cent had graduated from a high school with 151 or more students and 46.3 per cent had been in the top 25 per cent of their high school graduating class. Their NTSU grade point average was 2.42, their SAT scores had a mean of 900.4 and those with ACT scores had a mean of 18.9 composite. Over sixty per cent had taken 12 semester hours or more during each of their last two semesters at NTSU and 42.6 per cent had attended three or more semesters at the university. Responses as to the two major reasons for choosing NTSU indicated that 55.9 per cent had come because of the location of the school and 42.6 per cent had come because of the reputation of their

academic major.

Academic majors of those responding were compared to the number of undergraduates majoring in those same areas from a recent fall semester. The majors with more than five per cent were:

Major	Sample	Fall, 1977 Undergraduates
Music	11.7%	9.8%
Accounting and Information Systems	8.1%	7.9%
Administrative Sciences and Marketing	8.1%	8.2%
Art	7.8%	7.9%
Biological Sciences	6.1%	4.8%
Speech Communication and Drama	5.2%	4.1%
Elementary/Early Childhood Education	5.2%	7.5%
Undecided about a major	9.4%	14.0%

While in school, 34.4 per cent of the students had lived in a dormitory and 34.1 per cent had lived outside of Denton. Thirty-one percent lived in Denton but not in a dorm, and over 40 per cent lived with some of their family while at NTSU (parents, spouse, etc.). The two major sources of income indicated were personal income and/or savings (75.5 per cent) and parental or family aid (52.8 per cent). Over 37 per cent were not employed while 33.6 per cent worked outside of Denton and 23.2 per cent indicated they worked 31 hours or more per week. Over 36 per cent indicated that they had already enrolled in another college or university and the same per cent planned to again enroll at NTSU at a later date. Over 40 per cent planned to receive a bachelor's degree as their highest degree and 33.8 per cent planned to get a master's.

Of those responding to each item, the percentage indicating that an item was either a "major" or a "moderate" reason for leaving the university included:

Not enough money to continue in school	31.1%
Needed a temporary break and more time to decide on the future	28.5%
Conflict between job and studies	23.8%
Dissatisfaction with major department	21.2%
Major or courses not available	19.2%
Home responsibilities too great	16.0%

The characteristics of NTSU or services provided by the university in which students had "much" or "great" satisfaction were:

Library services	77.4%
The university in general	68.7%
Recreational opportunities	62.5%
Intellectual stimulation and quality of instruction	60.2%
Relevance of major field with career goals	59.2%
Course content in major field	59.1%
Schedule of classes	59.0%

Those in which respondents were not satisfied were:

Opportunity for financial aid	39.1%
Student skills improvement programs	38.2%
Counseling/guidance services	29.3%
Opportunity for employment while in school	29.2%
Academic advising services	27.5%

Comments from Respondents

Over half of the respondents wrote in comments, and, as would be expected in questionnaires such as this, many of them were negative in nature. It should be noted, however, that about 75 respondents commented on their satisfaction with the university.

In general the comments reflected the findings from the more structured portions of the questionnaire. Many expressed dis-

satisfaction with the time scheduling of their classes and their need for night and weekend offerings of upper level courses (31 comments), thirty persons were unsatisfied with teachers or teaching in general, others said their major was not available or not strong enough (21 persons), others were dissatisfied with counseling services, especially in academic departments (27 persons), twenty-four were dissatisfied with the dormitories and especially the 60 SCH requirement. Many persons commented further on their personal reasons for leaving school (32 had family problems of some kind, including marriage, new babies, etc.) and twenty-one thought it was too far to travel to school. Many who had had financial troubles commented they were saving money to return to school.

Conclusions and Suggestions

Information from several portions of the questionnaire require further analysis and a study of actions which need to be taken by persons at the university.

The number of respondents from the various academic majors should serve to alert some departments, and comments from the respondents supported the reasons for dropping out of those from various majors. It would seem an unusually large percentage were from Music, from Biological Sciences, and from Speech Communication and Drama, as compared to the total number of majors in each of these areas. It also might justify the time and effort involved to check out the majors of those who indicated that their major or courses they needed were not available.

Lack of financial support was a very important factor in the nonreturn of many students, as reflected in the reasons for leaving and in the comments. Even some of those who received financial aid did not receive a sufficient amount for them to continue school, and so more needs to be done to help students who have financial problems. It is also important to note that over 17 per cent indicated that they needed a break and some time to think about schooling and ten per cent indicated that this reason was minor to them but still somewhat important. From the data, there is little support for the theory that over 20 per cent might have dropped out because of their fear of communicating.

Respondents indicated their dissatisfaction with several aspects of the university, many of which relate directly to programs and services provided by Student Affairs personnel. Evidently more time and effort need to be spent in planning for and working with the needs of students in the areas of academic advising, counseling and guidance, student skills improvement, and financial aid. These responses and others from the questionnaire help to indicate the "fit" between the student's perception of the university or college training in general and the university itself.

APPENDIX

OFFICE OF THE PRESIDENT
North Texas State University
Denton, Texas

Dear Former Student:

Our records show that you attended North Texas State University recently but that you are not now enrolled. We are interested in learning why you are no longer here and what might have been done to help you remain in school.

You can help us in planning to improve services to our students by answering the following questions. It should take about 15 minutes to respond.

Please feel free to make any additional comments in the space provided. All of your responses will remain completely confidential. Note that instructions on the last page indicate how to return the questionnaire at no cost to you.

Thank you for your help.

Sincerely,

C. C. Nolen

C. C. Nolen
President

(10) 1

Please check [✓] the appropriate response for each question.

(11) Check the item that best describes your enrollment at NTSU the last two semesters you were here:

1[ ] Part-time student -- 11 hours or less
2[ ] Full-time student -- 12 hours or more
3[ ] Full-time one semester and part-time the other

(12) How many fall and/or spring semesters did you enroll in NTSU? *(Do not count summers)*

1[ ] 1 semester
2[ ] 2 semesters
3[ ] 3 or more semesters

(13) Were you a veteran?

1[ ] Yes
2[ ] No

● Students usually have several reasons for choosing a university. Please check the two most important reasons you chose NTSU. *(Check two items)*

01[ ] General academic reputation
02[ ] Reputation of academic major
03[ ] Influence of parent or relative
04[ ] Influence of counselor, teacher or other high school employee
05[ ] Friends attending NTSU
06[ ] Contact by university representatives
07[ ] Impression of the campus and students
08[ ] Athletic program (football, etc.)
09[ ] Size of NTSU student body
10[ ] Location of NTSU
11[ ] Was offered financial assistance
12[ ] Less expensive than other schools
13[ ] Was not accepted by school of first choice
[ ] Other--please specify:

_____

(14-17) ____

Please continue on next page

(18-19) Check the last department or school in which you were majoring at NTSU.

College of Arts and Sciences

01[ ] Art
02[ ] Biological Sciences
03[ ] Chemistry
04[ ] Computer Science
05[ ] Economics
06[ ] English
07[ ] Foreign Language
08[ ] Geography
09[ ] History
10[ ] Journalism
11[ ] Mathematics
12[ ] Philosophy
13[ ] Physics
14[ ] Political Science
15[ ] Psychology
16[ ] Sociology and Anthropology
17[ ] Speech Communication and Drama

College of Business Administration

18[ ] Accounting and Information Systems
19[ ] Administrative Sciences and Marketing
20[ ] Behavioral Sciences and Busi. Educ.
21[ ] Finance, Insurance, Real Estate & Law

College of Education

22[ ] Elementary/Early Childhood Education
23[ ] Secondary Education
24[ ] Industrial Arts
25[ ] Other Education area
26[ ] Health, Physical Educ., and Recreation

School of Home Economics

27[ ] Home Economics

School of Music

28[ ] Music

Other

29[ ] Undecided about major
30[ ] Other major--please specify:

_____

(20) Where did you live most of the time you were at NTSU?

1[ ] In a dormitory
2[ ] In Denton (but not in a dorm)
3[ ] Outside of Denton

(21) Did you live with parents, spouse, or other relatives most of the time while at NTSU?

1[ ] Yes
2[ ] No

(22) Marital status last semester at NTSU:

1[ ] Not married
2[ ] Married -- spouse not a student
3[ ] Married -- spouse was also a student

(23) Did you have dependent children living with you?

1[ ] Yes
2[ ] No

- What were your two main sources of income while attending NTSU? *(Check two items if applicable)*

1[ ] Personal income and/or savings (including part-time work)
2[ ] Parental or family aid
3[ ] Repayable loan
4[ ] Scholarship, grant or other gifts
5[ ] Veterans benefits
6[ ] Social security benefits

(24-25) ____,

(26) Check the item that best describes your employment while at NTSU:

1[ ] Was not employed
2[ ] Work-study or other on-campus work
3[ ] Off-campus work in Denton
4[ ] Off-campus work outside of Denton

(27) How many hours per week were you employed while at NTSU?

1[ ] Was not employed
2[ ] Worked 20 hours or less per week
3[ ] Worked 21-30 hours per week
4[ ] Worked 31 hours or more per week

(28) What are your future college plans?

1[ ] Have already enrolled at another college or university
2[ ] Will again enroll at NTSU at a later date
3[ ] Will enroll in another college or university at a later date
4[ ] Have no plans to continue in college in the near future

(29) What is the highest degree you plan to receive eventually?

1[ ] No degree
2[ ] Bachelor's degree
3[ ] Master's degree
4[ ] Doctor's degree
5[ ] Professional degree (medicine, dentistry, veterinary, law, theology)

Please continue on the next page.

POSSIBLE REASONS FOR LEAVING SCHOOL

- Please respond to each item by circling the appropriate number.

EXAMPLE--Circle "3" if "moderate reason." 1 2 (3) 4

- To what extent were these your reasons for leaving NTSU?

	NOT A REASON	MINOR REASON	MODERATE REASON	MAJOR REASON
	1	2	3	4
Academic				
(30) Course work not challenging	1	2	3	4
(31) Courses were too difficult	1	2	3	4
(32) Grades were too low	1	2	3	4
(33) Major or courses not available	1	2	3	4
(34) Dissatisfaction with major department	1	2	3	4
(35) Personal conflicts with instructors	1	2	3	4
Financial				
(36) Not enough money to continue in school	1	2	3	4
(37) Applied for but could not get financial aid	1	2	3	4
(38) Received some financial aid but amount was not sufficient	1	2	3	4
(39) Could not find part-time job	1	2	3	4
(40) Child care not available or too expensive	1	2	3	4
(41) Conflict between job and studies	1	2	3	4
Personal				
(42) Found study too time-consuming	1	2	3	4
(43) Inadequate study skills or habits	1	2	3	4
(44) Home responsibilities too great	1	2	3	4
(45) Illness--personal or family	1	2	3	4
(46) Participating in classes made me nervous	1	2	3	4
(47) College not what I expected	1	2	3	4
(48) Did not feel accepted, felt lonely	1	2	3	4
(49) Completed my personal goals in schooling	1	2	3	4
(50) Marriage situation changed plans	1	2	3	4
(51) Did not enjoy being with other students	1	2	3	4
(52) Family moved out of the area	1	2	3	4
(53) Needed a temporary break and more time to decide on future	1	2	3	4

DEGREE OF SATISFACTION WITH NTSU

- Please respond to each item by circling the appropriate number.

EXAMPLE--Circle "3" to indicate "much." 1 2 (3) 4 0

- To what degree were you satisfied with the following aspects of NTSU?

	DEGREE OF SATISFACTION				
	NONE	MODERATE	MUCH	GREAT	NO OPINION
	1	2	3	4	0
Academic and General					
(54) The university in general	1	2	3	4	0
(55) Information given to you about NTSU before enrolling	1	2	3	4	0
(56) Academic advising services	1	2	3	4	0
(57) Counseling/guidance services	1	2	3	4	0
(58) Student skills improvement programs--how to study, etc.	1	2	3	4	0
(59) Library services	1	2	3	4	0
(60) Intellectual stimulation and quality of instruction	1	2	3	4	0
(61) Amount of contact with teachers	1	2	3	4	0
(62) Your schedule of classes	1	2	3	4	0
Major Field of Study					
(63) Course content in your major field	1	2	3	4	0
(64) General requirements in your major field	1	2	3	4	0
(65) Relevance of your major field to your career goals	1	2	3	4	0
Financial					
(66) Opportunity for financial aid	1	2	3	4	0
(67) Opportunity for employment while in school	1	2	3	4	0
(68) Cost of attending NTSU	1	2	3	4	0
Personal					
(69) Residence/living accommodations	1	2	3	4	0
(70) Social opportunities	1	2	3	4	0
(71) Extracurricular opportunities	1	2	3	4	0
(72) Cultural opportunities	1	2	3	4	0
(73) Recreational opportunities	1	2	3	4	0
(74) Religious environment	1	2	3	4	0

- We would welcome your comments, especially suggestions for changes that might help someone like yourself continue as a student. Comment space is provided on the next page.

Please fold the questionnaire so that the Business Reply is visible and then staple or tape it so it will remain folded.

THANKS AGAIN FOR YOUR HELP!